WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A purified and isolated nucleic acid molecule which encodes human hepatitis C virus of genotype 2a, said molecule capable of expressing said virus when transfected into cells.

2. The nucleic acid molecule of claim 1, wherein said molecule encodes the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:2.

3. The nucleic acid molecule of claim 2, wherein said molecule comprises the nucleic acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:1.

4. A DNA construct comprising a nucleic acid molecule according to claim 1.

5. A DNA construct comprising a nucleic acid molecule according to claim 3.

6. An RNA transcript of the DNA construct of claim 4.

7. An RNA transcript of the DNA construct of claim 5.

8. A cell transfected with the DNA construct of claim 4.

9. A cell transfected with the DNA construct of claim 5.

10. A cell transfected with RNA transcript of claim 6.

11. A cell transfected with RNA transcript of claim 7.

12. A hepatitis C virus polypeptide produced by the cell of claims 8 or 9.

13. A hepatitis C virus polypeptide produced by the cell of claims 10 or 11.

14. A hepatitis C virus produced by the cell of claims 8 or 9.

15. A hepatitis C virus produced by the cell of claims 10 or 11.

16. A hepatitis C virus whose genome comprises a nucleic acid molecule according to claim 1.

17. A hepatitis C virus whose genome comprises a nucleic acid molecule according to claim 3.

18. A method for producing a hepatitis C virus comprising transfecting a host cell with the RNA transcript of claims 6 or 7.

19. A polypeptide encoded by a nucleic acid sequence according to claim 1.

20. A polypeptide encoded by a nucleic acid sequence according to claim 3.

21. The polypeptide of claim 19, wherein said polypeptide is selected from the group consisting of NS3 protease, E1 protein, E2 protein or NS4 protein.

22. The polypeptide of claim 20, wherein said polypeptide is selected from the group consisting of NS3 protease, E1 protein, E2 protein or NS4 protein.

23. A method for assaying candidate antiviral agents for activity against HCV, comprising:

a) exposing a cell containing the hepatitis C virus of claims 16 or 17 to the candidate antiviral agent; and

b) measuring the presence or absence of hepatitis C virus replication in the cell of step (a).

24. The method of claim 23, wherein said replication in step (b) is measured by at least one of the following: negative strand RT-PCR, quantitative RT-PCR, Western blot, immunofluoresence, or infectivity in a susceptible animal.

25. A method for assaying candidate antiviral agents for activity against HCV, comprising:

a) exposing an HCV protease encoded by a nucleic acid sequence according to claims 1 or 3 or a fragment thereof to the candidate antiviral agent in the presence of a protease substrate; and

b) measuring the protease activity of said protease.

26. The method of claim 25, wherein said HCV protease is selected from the group consisting of an NS3 domain protease, an NS3-NS4A fusion polypeptide, or an NS2-NS3 protease.

27. An antiviral agent identified as having antiviral activity for HCV by the method of claim 23.

28. An antiviral agent identified as having antiviral activity for HCV by the method of claim 25.

29. Antibody to the polypeptide of claim 19.

30. Antibody to the polypeptide of claim 20.

31. Antibody to the hepatitis C virus of claim 16.

32. Antibody to the hepatitis C virus of claim 17.

33. A method for determining the susceptibility of cells *in vitro* to support HCV infection, comprising the steps of:

a) growing animal cells in vitro;

b) transfecting into said cells the nucleic acid of claim 1; and

c) determining if said cells show indicia of HCV replication.

34. The method according to claim 33, wherein said cells are human cells.

35. A composition comprising a polypeptide of claim 19 suspended in a suitable amount of a pharmaceutically acceptable diluent or excipient.

36. A composition comprising a polypeptide of claim 20 suspended in a suitable amount of a pharmaceutically acceptable diluent or excipient.

37. A composition comprising a nucleic acid molecule of claim 1 suspended in a suitable amount of a pharmaceutically acceptable diluent or excipient.